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Audrey Fogels

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“Strange Sights and Sounds”: Indirection and the Rhetoric of the Feminine in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s Tales (1852-1930)

Audrey Fogels

> “House said to be haunted. Strange sights and sounds. Your niece, Agnes Dent, died a year ago, about this time” (“The Wind in the Rosebush”)
> “I wouldn’t go into that house if they would give me the rent. I’ve seen enough of haunted houses to last me as long as I live” (“The Lost Ghost”)
> “Nobody knew how this elderly woman with the untrammeled imagination of a child dreaded to enter the southwest chamber, and yet she could not have told why” (“The Southwest Chamber”)

1 Regionalist writer Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) is best known today for her keen portrayal of New England local life and for the way in which her short stories challenge ready-made representations of the region in post-bellum America. “A New England Nun,” which features the very Dickinsonian character Louisa Ellis, who prefers to remain single rather than relinquish her freedom, is a case in point: in the ways it unravels the carefully knit cliché of the “old maid” together with how it explores an unorthodox choice of life, this short story reads as an indictment of the ready-made and then widely-held assumption that the American region is a space which is both backwards and monolithic. Alongside a body of work, which thanks to the work of Fetterely and Pryse in America and Cécile Roudeau in France, has become more critically explored over the years, there is yet another, centered on elements of the supernatural and in which haunted houses play a key role. Widely read in the XIXth century, these texts have garnered less attention in the XXth century, perhaps because with their supernatural overtones they have been likened to the gothic tradition,

whose prestige has sometimes been overshadowed by Romanticism.[1] However, often written by women and for women, these nineteenth-century gothic narratives are more than merely innocuous hair-raisers. While they certainly may be ascribed to women's need for economic independence, the emergence of a leisured middle class and the development of the American magazine industry, these popular stories also function as distorting echo chambers resounding with highly problematic issues.

2 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's stories "The Lost Ghost," "The Southwest Chamber," and "The Wind in the Rosebush," belong to such a group of haunted tales and allow for the veiled exploration of such disturbing issues as abused children, frustrated female desire and socially "improper" feelings, like jealousy and female envy. While the setting of these texts remains comfortingly regional, the issues that are raised in these narratives delve into unchartered and uncanny territories. They present stories of pain, loss and frustration, all very removed from what one expects to find in regional narrative, whose themes traditionally center on stories of empathy, reunion and comforting domesticity. As such, these tales can be likened to haunted structures in which "strange sights and sounds" reverberate to form haunting narratives. Interestingly, their meaning can be deciphered only in a cryptic, truncated and indirect fashion and the foreplay that characterizes them is in many ways linked to the feminine. The role played by the "scribbling women" in these texts, spinning yarns while playfully deferring the revelation of ever-elusive meanings, is indeed striking and attention will need to be given to this feminine rhetoric of indirection, which is nonetheless framed by spectral but authoritarian male figures.

Setting the stage: provincial gothic revisited[2]

3 "The Wind in the Rosebush" is the story of Rebecca Flint, a typically hard working, slightly masculine (flint) and self-sacrificing New England heroine who has taken care of her mother up to her dying day and who, freed from that burden after her mother's death and having inherited some money from her uncle, is able to quit her teaching job and travel to Ford Village to bring back her dead sister's sixteen-year-old daughter to live with her. The young girl had been living with her stepmother, Mrs. John Dent, herself a widow, but Rebecca Flint now feels she is so "situated" (10) that she can suit her niece's needs. The text opens on her boarding the ferry that is to take her to Ford Village, a place which has no railroad station and is on the "other side" of the river, "accessible only by a ford and the ferry." As such, it stands for the remote regional town whose isolation allows strange events to take place. Interestingly, this iconic village is already a haunted structure as its description recycles themes and traits that have become formulaic. As Lawrence Buell states:

> The conceptualization of the village as utopia and the village as backwater developed symbiotically during our period, the balance finally shifting decisively from the first to the second not simply as the function of the economic and cultural change but also as a result of the fact that village culture had been done to the point of cliché (Buell, 1986, 318).

4 The secondary characters that Rebecca meets on the boat operate as regional clichés as well, haunting the text with their strange peculiarities and odd idiosyncrasies. Slow-witted and dumb, Mrs. Amblecrom is introduced as "mildly stupid" and inarticulate, "opening her mouth to speak, making little abortive motions" (8) while her husband is described as a grounded and pragmatic man whose "stolid keenness" (9) makes him

believe only what his eyes can see; there is no room for abstract thought here. As for the young boy who will drive Rebecca Flint to her dead sister's house when she has disembarked, he "was chewing with as dully a reflective expression as a cow", answering her questions with a primal and animal-like "bewildered and incoherent grunt" (11). These are "not very bright" people and their roots, so deeply anchored in the soil of the region that they seem to have gone bad, set the stage for yet stranger events to come.

5 Aloof and minding her own business at the beginning, Rebecca Flint is nonetheless quickly plunged into the *inquiétante étrangeté* of the place. In this gothicized region, men play a particularly haunting role. During the crossing, Rebecca strikes up a conversation with Mrs. Amblecrom about her dead sister's husband's second wife and her niece but she gets no answers to her questions. If Mrs. Amblecrom reacts very strangely to her inquiries, her husband's attitude is even more disquieting for, like a puppeteer working behind the scene, he forbids his wife to tell Rebecca anything: "She glanced at her husband with an expression of doubt and terror, and he shook his head *forbiddingly*" (9, italics mine). Compared to a foreign and strange "Chinese toy" rhythmically shaking his head in disapproval, Mr. Amblecrom is a menacing figure who says little but means a lot: "The man's warning shake at his wife was fairly *portentous*" (10, italics mine). If Mr. Amblecrom is silent, his role is nonetheless central for it is his very refusal to say anything that will send Rebecca on her quest, producing the narrative the readers read. Standing on the threshold of the narrative, this male figure forbids any revelation but makes it possible for Rebecca to embark on her quest and have a story to tell: " 'Seems as though I ought to have told her, Thomas.' 'Let her find it out herself,' replied the man" (10). Finding out what happened to her niece is precisely what Rebecca Flint wants, as her quest and wandering plot the narrative Mr. Amblecrom refuses to tell. From the start, then, the feminine is linked to peregrinations and adventures while the masculine blocks and forbids.

6 However, like an innocent gothic heroine unaware that she is about to embark on a frightening journey,[3] Rebecca Flint is strangely blind to the many ominous signs that should have warned her, unaware that the "grating" sound made by the ferry when it finally reaches its destination foreshadows even more unpleasant events. When she disembarks, Rebecca Flint is driven to her dead sister's house. Despite its new and prosperous-looking appearance, the house reinforces the feeling of uneasiness previously introduced in the text: "Its *white* paint had a *new* gloss; its *blinds* were an *immaculate* apple *green*; the lawn was *trimmed* as *smooth* as velvet, and it was dotted with *scrupulous* groups of hydrangeas and cannas" (11, italics mine). In this description, the traditional gothic trappings have been reversed. The House of Usher's fissured façade and leaden-hued atmosphere has been replaced by color and light; wilderness and madness by order and domestication; desolation and putrefaction by novelty and finish. Still, if these gothic props are "all new," horror nonetheless remains. Surfaces can be impenetrable, and it is precisely the very blankness, banality and "platitude" of the place that makes it eerie. The very excessive care given to house and lawn together with the artificiality and starchiness of the landscape are horrifying indeed, portending an elaborate trap. The house is a sham, a deceitful decoy whose colorful and glossy surfaces "blind" any who come near it. Multiple layers have been added to the "aboriginal structure"—"*dormer* windows," a "*carved* railing" and a "*hard*-wood" door (11, italics mine)—resulting in a convoluted structure of complex preciosity and

harshness creating menacing labyrinths.[4] As for the parlor, it too weaves a deathly web as the "lace curtains" menace to ensnare the visitor, while its polished surfaces, "*brilliant* upholstery" and "*polished* wood" (10, italics mine), work as mesmerizing depths. The safety of a comfortable domestic space is as deceitful as is the harmlessness of the child's nursery in "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

7 Just as her house offers a reverse image of traditional gothic trappings, Mrs. John Dent is introduced as the reverse image of the classic gothic villain, whose type is well exemplified by Hawthorne's Aylmer. Healthy, large and handsome, Agnes' stepmother is completely opposed to the pale, sickly and deformed scientist of "The Birthmark." But, far from signifying anything maternal and comforting, Mrs. Dent's "very large and handsome" body points in fact to her duplicitous nature, something which her name—dent—suggests. She hides much horror behind her "frizzled head," while her "voluminous ruffles of starched embroidery" (12) function like the stifling ("starched") labyrinths of gothic novels. Their dizzying patterns are as misleading as the color of Mrs. Dent's complexion: "As she spoke, the beautiful deep-*rose* color suffused her face, her *blue* eyes met her visitors with the *opaqueness* of *turquoise* - with a *revelation* of *blue*, but a *concealment* of all behind" (13, italics mine). Colors invade the text but give no life; covering all, they work like screens. Speaking in a "harsh voice, which seemed to come forth from her chest with no intervention of organs of speech," (12) Mrs. Dent is a decoy who hides behind a "double-chinned" (12) and haunted façade. What's more, her entire being seems haunted by her dead husband, who lies in the very center of her identity: "Mrs. *John* Dent." Like Mr. Amblecrom previously, he is a haunting male figure, one who is both physically absent from but central to the *diegesis* for it is he who, after all, links the two women.

8 Possessed by her husband, colonized within her being by a masculine other, Mrs. John Dent is an equivocal and uncanny woman. When she explains to Rebecca that she is "subject to—*spells*," her cleft syntax unwittingly points to her haunted nature. In fact, her hysterical body *signifies* in spite of her self: "her lips *parted* in a *horrible* caricature of smile" (12). The site of numerous absences, Mrs. Dent is made up of other texts and identities. Haunted, she stands as a synecdoche for the entire text. As for Rebecca, she is intent on holding onto her literal reading of the world in spite of evidence; to the end, she refuses to abandon her belief that "all's fine" in the diegetic world.

Finding an audience: a female world of love and ritual[5]

9 While to the end Rebecca Flint refuses to be awakened, the optimistic, solar and aptly named Mrs. Emerson of "The Lost Ghost" is ready to have her faith shattered as she convinces her friend, Mrs. Meserve, to tell her about her own ghost story. "The Lost Ghost" opens unto another regional scene in which Mrs. John Emerson and Mrs. Rhoda Meserve, two talkative, warm and friendly characters are involved in the traditionally feminine activity of crocheting, which is from the start presented as a productive and serious feminine activity/art: "It takes me a week every minute I can get to make one. I wish those that bought such things for twenty-five cents had to make them. Guess they'd sing another song" (122). As they chat and gossip during their needle work and underline its importance, the two women postpone the moment when the story will actually start: "The two women rocked and sewed and crocheted in silence for two or three minutes. They were both *waiting*. Mrs. Meserve *waited* for the other's curiosity to

develop in order that her news might have, as it were a befitting stage entrance. Mrs. Emerson *waited* for the news" (123). The ritualistic beginning of the narrative, whereby both women delay the tale, creates the perfect conditions for ghost stories as Julia Briggs explains:

> The telling of tales around the fireside makes explicit a particular aspect of the ghost story which depends upon a tension between the cosy and familiar world of life (associated with heim and heimisch-home and the domestic) and the mysterious and unknowable world of death 'unheimlich,' or uncanny) (Punter, 2000, 127).

10 In the case of Mrs. Meserve, the delay can also be linked to the truth at hand, for the (im)proper story of abuse and neglect at the heart of her story is in fact not an easy one to recount. Indeed, Mrs. Meserve says that the tale she is about to tell still haunts her every day: "There hasn't been a day nor a night since it happened that I haven't thought of it, and always I have felt shivers go down my back when I did" (126). More interestingly, however, this art of delay can be read as typical of a feminine rhetoric, one in which elusiveness and suspension are as important as the truth to be revealed. The pleasure Mrs. Meserve and Mrs. Emerson take in the very act of waiting is tangible not only in the polyptoton of the word "wait" but also in the rhythm created by the alternation of short and long sentences together with the reference to the rhythmical rocking of the chair. As for the silence, it too is also an index of the women's "developing" pleasure, pointing to the deep understanding they have of each other.

11 The desire for such female complicity is made even more obvious when Mrs. Meserve makes it clear that she will only accept to launch upon her narrative once her friend has promised *not* to repeat it to her own husband, as if the tale she were going to tell were something only women could understand. This is perhaps because, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains, up to the mid-nineteenth century "American society was characterized in large part by rigid gender-role differentiation within the family and within the society as a whole, leading to the emotional segregation of men and women" (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985, 60). Gendered, experience simply could not be shared and explains Mrs. Meserve's construction of an enclosed interpretative female community: "Simon advised me not to talk about it... Then he said he wouldn't talk about it. He said lots of folks would sooner tell folks my head wasn't right than to own up they couldn't see through it" (125). In spite of her obvious reliance on her husband's opinion, Mrs. Meserve is intent on being taken seriously and does not want her tale to be construed as the ravings of a mad woman who tells unbelievable tall-tale. Working with precision and care ("It takes me a week very minute I can get to make one [worsted]" 122), she wants her art to be taken seriously and to that effect, she insists on constructing a friendly space of response, a female audience. Walking the line between social acceptance and self-expression is a challenge that Mrs. Meserve seems to solve in the creation of a well-meaning audience, one that can lend a kind ear and conclude, like Mrs. Emerson: "Well, it's pretty work" (122).

Masculine proper(ty) and (im)proper desire: the case of Flora

12 Regional characters are also the protagonists of "The Southwest Chamber" which opens onto Sophia and Amanda, two middle-aged and unmarried sisters who rent out rooms

in the house they have just inherited from their dead aunt, Harriet. The story starts as the two sisters discuss the opportunity of having their new boarder sleep in the room of their recently departed relative, an idea which brings an expression of "mingled terror and doubt" (67) to Amanda's face. The fact is, strange events are introduced very early on in "The Southwest Chamber" and despite Sophia's resoluteness—which she will only give up at the very end—Amanda's fears seem to be justified: a purple dress keeps re-appearing in the dead aunt's closet while the willful closet door of the room keeps swinging open, letting out a strong smell of lovage. When the different boarders find out about these events, they all volunteer to sleep in the chamber, convinced that nothing will happen to them. But they all fail the test and find themselves confronted with an undeniably haunted chamber.

13 Following the pattern of traditional ghost stories in which the past haunts the present, the ghost that returns to the southwest chamber is most obviously Aunt Harriet who does not want anyone to inhabit her house. In a sometimes comic reversal of traditional gothic *topoi*, her (h)aunts take on domestic accents: whether her attempts to scare away the tenants are made via a ruffled-nightcap, changing chintz patterns, the transformation of a brooch, a sewing kit left unattended or a purple dress, the props involved are clearly domestic and feminine ones. It is the very heart of well-known domesticity that is being destroyed in Freeman's haunted, and sometimes comical, text. But, just as in a typical and self-consciously wrought Hawthornean tale of past feuds,[6] the past Amelia and Sophia share is a complicated history of family hatred; it is more than resentment towards the living that makes Aunt Harriet's ghost return. Indeed, the past is not something finished and gone; it seeps into the present, making it haunted and spectral, never actually there:

> Nous sommes des héritiers, cela ne veut pas dire que nous avons ou que nous recevons ceci ou cela, que tel héritage nous enrichit un jour de ceci ou cela, mais que l'être que nous sommes est d'abord héritage, que nous le voulions et le sachions ou non. (Derrida, 1993, 94).

14 Sophia and Amanda have not only inherited their dead aunt's house; along with it, they have inherited its entire history.

15 Significantly, Aunt Harriet did not wholeheartedly leave the house to the two sisters for they belong to the poor branch of the family, which got disinherited after their mother married the destitute William Gill against family wishes. After the wedding, the Old Ackley grandmother and their aunt (Aunt Harriet) were pitiless to the last, not speaking to the (unnamed) sister guilty of family treason to the day of her death. Clearly then, when they inherit the house, Sophia and Amanda also inherit a feud linked to female desire and masculine property.[7] Indeed, while men seem absent from this feud—nothing is said about the old Ackley Grandfather, William Gill dies young and Flora's father remarries—, the masculine nonetheless plays a spectral, yet central, role. It is indeed very masculine Aunt Harriet and her mother who enable the tale to be told. It is they who decide to ostracize their daughter/sister, dispossessing her of the family property and setting in motion the haunting to come. Interestingly, the two sisters who survive and who inherit the house are anything but womanly—Sophia's body, flint-like and spare, is likened to that of a man's, while Amanda's soft and flabby skin is constantly compared to a child's—as if property could only be transmitted to males or to masculine figures; women have no share in the inheritance. The fact is, there seems to be no proper future—and hence no property—for unauthorized and improper female desire: Harriet's unnamed sister dies after giving birth to her three daughters (Amanda,

Sophia and Jane) while Jane herself dies within a year of her own marriage and birth of her daughter, Flora; the fate of fertile women is a bleak one. Like her predecessors, young Flora will also wither in this context.

16 Indeed, Amanda and Jane live with their dead sister's sixteen-year old daughter, the sensually named Flora, to whom they want to pass on the house: "Sophia and Amanda thought directly of Flora when they knew of the inheritance" (73). If Flora is the youngest efflorescence of the family tree, the one who should inherit the family property, paternal property law will make it impossible for her to fully bloom. However hard she tries, Sophia is vanquished by the spirit of her hauntingly masculine aunt. Indeed, horrified by the ghost of her aunt, Sophia ends up selling the family house, unwittingly depriving Flora of the family property. Unable to go against the law of the father, young Flora will be forced to take up root on new soil. The power of the masculine to bar the feminine is strong in Freeman's world, excluding as it does from the diegesis any female offspring. While in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the "wild rose bush" had been allowed to flower on the threshold of the prison, in Freeman, there seems to be little place for such fantastically female flourishes—albeit in the haunted and guilty (?) act of storytelling.

"One need not be a chamber to be haunted":[8] haunted rooms and self-revelation

17 The story of "The Southwest Chamber" is undeniably a haunted story. But, while one could argue that the room is haunted by the ghost of Aunt Harriet, one could also argue that the room is not so much haunted by the dead as by the living. Indeed, the room appears as a self-revelatory space where each individual is made to confront his/her own hidden secrets and desires. Like a blank page awaiting inscription, the room is presented as a place of self-revelation, a chamber where the deep and hidden secrets of its occupants can come to the fore and be revealed:

> The room was a very large one. The four windows, two facing south, two west, were *closed*, the *blinds* also. The room was in a *film* of green *gloom*. The furniture loomed out *vaguely*. The gilt frame of a *blurred* old engraving on the wall *caught a little light*. The *white* counterpane on the bed showed like a *blank page*. (69, italics mine)

18 While the madwoman's attic has given way to a room less remote and eccentric, standing as it does in the middle of the road ("at a crossroads"), here its large, southern facing windows are closed, veiling the chamber in a film of gloom. Unreadable, the room nonetheless beckons, as a blurred old engraving hanging in the room "catches" light, calling attention to itself. Indeed, the pictureless picture hanging on the wall recalls an eighteenth-century anamorphosis, whose outline comes to life from a certain perspective only.[9] Meaningless for the wrongly positioned eye, the picture will reveal a different meaning for each of its occupants. As for the white counterpane on the bed, it is a blank page, a white surface ready to be (re)written on. Indeed, the "white satin scroll-work on the wall-paper"[10] suggests the arabesques and curves of handwriting whose very tropological productivity is announced in the accumulation of hyphenated words and comparisons ("like a blank page"). Apparently blank, the chamber is in fact a palimpsestic space that is not only already haunted by other traces but that also exposes them, be it in their very absence: the engraving is blurred but framed; the furniture is vague but looming; the space is blind but full of windows. The fact that a

strange purple dress together with the smell of lovage, an umbelliferous root that Aunt Harriet used to chew on, haunt the place also seems telling. The power of smell in evoking the supernatural is strong indeed and Michel de Certeau explains how because it is everywhere, all-encompassing and borderless, odor is the first sign of possession:

> Découpé par des objets représentés mais instables, l'espace ne possède vraiment les esprits que par l'odeur. Alors seulement et au sens territorial du terme, il 'occupe' témoins et acteurs. Les apparences, elles, sont toujours à distance, suspectes par suite d'une combinaison de plus en plus subtile de l'artifice et du doute. Mais elles donnent lieu à une autre expérience quand s'y ajoute la perception olfactive interne. Il y a saut qualitatif. L'espace interne du corps participe alors à l'étendue des choses. À la limite, le sentir garantit, juge et précède le voir (Michel de Certeau, 1990, 69).

19 Evoking both love and old age (lov/age), the root comes to signify the deep-root(ed) desires of the different women who will occupy it in turn. Still, the root of their desires will never be fully revealed. Indeed, the very circularity of the tale, whereby seemingly endless occupants of the room undergo new and different experiences, underscores how any closure is simply impossible.

20 The transformative and self-revelatory power of this room is first exemplified in Amanda's behavior; her supernatural experience in the southwest chamber affects both her body and her acts: "Amanda hesitated. She had been trained to truth. *Then* she lied" (72, italics mine). Acting in unaccustomed ways, she is transfigured by the room which reveals to her self "untrained" thoughts and attitudes she did not know she had: "she felt a curious sense of being *inverted* mentally. It was as if all her traditions and laws of life were *on their heads*" (70, italics mine). The self-transformative power of the room will also be taken up by Miss Louisa Stark, a stout, solidly built and majestic schoolteacher, who is presented as an anchored and pragmatic woman able to withstand hardships. Moving into the room after her long journey, she settles in quickly but soon encounters the supernatural as she starts dressing for dinner. When she pins an old fashioned brooch to the lace at her throat, it undergoes a transformation when she looks at it in the mirror: "Instead of the familiar bunch of pearl grapes on the black onyx, she saw a knot of blonde and black hair under glass surrounded by a boarder of twisted gold. She felt a thrill of horror, though she could not tell why." (80) When Miss Stark looks at the object directly, without the mirror's mediation, the object assumes its former shape. When she looks at it indirectly, the brooch is transformed into a Victorian bell-jar-like trinket, displaying two strands of entwined hair. In these instances, the mirror distorts the point of origin of the gaze and reveals the anamorphosis, showing the sinister figure for what it really is: while this object can be seen as embodying Miss Stark's hidden and untold desire for youth and love—not grayish-blonde but "blonde" hair; not virginal "white" grapes but an interpenetrated "knot of blonde and black hair"—the brooch can also be seen as a "horrifying" object, a morbid vanity-like memento that does not decorate so much as it calls attention to death and the passage of time. The knot of hair surrounded by the boarder of twisted gold and capped by a glass cover eventually coalesces into the figure of an all-prying eye/I which stares back at Miss Stark as she herself looks at her own reflection in the mirror. In this gaze that stares but cannot be seen in return, one is faced again with a spectral presence:

> Autre suggestion : ce quelqu'un d'autre spectral nous regarde, nous nous sentons regardés par lui, hors de toute synchronie, avant même et au-delà de tout regard de notre part, selon une antériorité (qui peut être de l'ordre de la génération, de plus

> d'une génération) et une dissymétrie absolues, selon une disproportion absolument immaîtrisable. L'anachronie fait ici loi. Que nous nous sentions vus par un regard qu'il sera toujours impossible de croiser, voilà l'effet de visière depuis lequel nous héritons la loi. (Derrida, 1993, 27)

21 Seen but unable to see back, faced with different temporal levels that render her own self foreign and distant, it is little wonder that what haunts Miss Stark and threatens her sanity is not so much the return of Aunt Harriet as of her own female self, embodied in this terrifyingly scopic I/eye: "She was cold with horror and terror, and yet not so much horror and terror of the supernatural *as of her own self*" (84, italics mine). When she returns from dinner, "the *awful horror of herself*" (87, italics mine) is taken up again in the discovery of her favorite silk dress, hanging with its sleeves sewn on the blurred engraving of her room: "She saw against the wall-paper directly facing the door the waist of her best silk satin dress hung over a picture" (83). Neatly framed by the picture, the sewed-up silk dress beckons as she walks into the room, reminding its wearer that her time for pleasure, fun and desire is over. The discovery in her closet of "strange-patterned silk things and satins" (85) fully confirms this self-estrangement and dislocation, for these bizarre and unnamed "things" are indeed dresses that no longer fit, functioning as the remains of a self that is no longer hers. Unable to stand these estranging visions, Miss Stark's only solution is to flee back to the safety of a known home/self: "She said she was sorry, but was ill, and feared lest she might be worse, and she felt that she must return *home* at once" (87).

22 Power and desire are at the root of Eliza's Lippincott's and Mrs. Simmons' own adventure in the Southwest Chamber. In this instance, the hauntings become almost comical as the patterns of the room—red roses or blue peacocks—change with seemingly no reason when either woman enters the room. In this story, it is significant both women feel the Southwest Chamber is the "best room in the house" when neither Eliza Lippincott nor Mrs. Simmons were given the haunted room (81). Mrs. Simmons dwells on this point quite emphatically: "I've got a real nice room; it faces east and gets the morning sun, *but it isn't so nice as yours*, according to my way of thinking. I'd rather take my chance any day in a room anybody had died in than in one that was hot in summer" (83, italics mine). When Mrs. Simmons is finally given the room it, she gloats: "It is the best room in the house, and I expect you all to be *envious* of me" (89, italics mine). After a night spent fighting a ruffled nightcap and seeing the chintz pattern change every minute, Mrs. Simmons finally abandons the room—but when she walks by Eliza Lippincott's room, she is careful to walk noiselessly, so as not to appear vanquished. The latter, who knows better, welcomes her at the breakfast table "with malicious curiosity and triumph" (95). What is significant in this episode is not so much whether the roses are red or the peacocks are blue, but the very fact the pattern constantly changes, expressing each woman's strong and mimetic desire to possess what the other has. Possessed and haunted by the possessions of the other, each woman is set on re-possessing the chamber. For Mrs. Simmons, the point is to keep the upper hand in her relation to Eliza Lippincott; while for Eliza Lippincott, the point is to triumph when the time comes: "She *felt she would die before she confessed* to the ghastly absurdity of that nightcap, or to having been disturbed by the flight of peacocks off a blue field of chintz after she had scoffed at the possibility of such a thing" (95, italics mine). The battle of the roses has more to do with female competition and envy than with ghosts, pointing to the ugly feelings that sometimes reside beneath the semblance of women's friendly companionship. If a community of women readers was a

precondition for storytelling in "The Lost Ghost," the very possibility of such a supportive community seems to be put into question in this episode.

23 When John Dunn (John Donne?), the Dimmesdale-like minister, volunteers to undergo the trial in order to refute any kind of unorthodox superstition, Sophia Gill is relieved, for she is worried the news about the haunted house will jeopardize her income/property by making it an improper place to let. She will soon be disappointed for despite his trust in God, the minister will be forced to return to his chamber when an "invisible presence" bars his entry to the room. Emasculated ("terror-stricken like a girl"), this feminized man is made to believe in a supernatural presence "despite his will." That an impediment of a material nature should have forbidden a man of the church to enter the room becomes meaningful when one considers the description given of him at the beginning of the text: "He was very spiritual, but he had had poor pickings in his previous boarding place, and he could not help a certain kind of abstract enjoyment over Miss Gill's cooking" (82). The irony present in the near oxymoron of "abstract" and "cooking" calls attention to Mr. Dunn's worldly considerations, a character trait that is taken up again later when Sophia Gill rose from the table "forcing the minister to leave a little pudding, at which he glanced *regretfully*" (83, italics mine). Mr. Dunn might be a minister but the corporeality of his "ingratiating" smile together with his worldly appetite are embodied in the very materiality of the ghost that forbids him to walk into the Southwest Chamber. If religion is of the soul, Mr. Dunn is careful to comfort his body.

24 Sophia Gill is the last contender for the southwest chamber and when the minister gives up, she finally decides to sleep there. Her pride and trust in her family property make it impossible for her to believe in haunted houses—let alone be frightened by them. Her masculine rationality will accept no such women's storytelling and she is well decided to prove all of her boarders wrong. However, her experience turns out to be horrifying yet, forcing her to face up to the loathsome feminine in her. The minute Sophia enters the room, she undergoes a transformation, becoming something she is not: she starts thinking thoughts that were "foreign" (98) to her. Convinced that she is bewitched by another self—"she knew she was thinking the thoughts of some *other* person" (99, italics mine)—, Sophia can of course be said to be haunted by the spirit of her dead aunt, whose ghostly presence aims once again to force her out of a house she never wanted her niece to have.

25 While this most obvious reading is certainly possible, it cannot exclude another interpretation where Sophia's supernatural adventure in the southwest chamber can be seen as an experience in self-confrontation, one in which she is made to endure *abjection*. Indeed, reaching back to pre-conscious times—"she began remembering *what she could not have remembered*, since she was not born yet" (98, italics mine)—, she starts feeling hatred and evil swell up in her. Surprisingly, her hatred is not directed against her judgmental grandmother and aunt but towards the people she loves most: her mother, her sister, Flora and her own self. "Fascinated" by these self-destructive emotions—"she felt *malignant* toward her own self" (99)—, self-hatred literally possesses her, transforming her being into another: "Evil suggestions surged in her brain—suggestions which *turned* her heart to stone and which still *fascinated* her" (99, italics mine). The magnetism she experiences is deadly indeed as it leads to the composition and almost literal re-configuration of a new self. This process of othering,

bringing to the surface a self she was unaware of, is made obvious in the mirror episode, when her reflection shows her a face that is not her own:

> She looked in the glass and saw, instead of her softly parted waves of hair, harsh lines of iron-gray under the black boarders of an old-fashioned headdress. She saw instead of her smooth, broad forehead, a high one wrinkled with the intensest concentration of selfish reflections of a long life; she saw instead of her steady blue eyes, black ones with depths of malignant reserve, behind a broad meaning of ill will; she saw instead of firm, benevolent mouth, one with a hard, thin line, a network of melancholic wrinkles. She saw instead of her own face, middle aged and good to see, the expression of a life of honesty and good will to others and patience under trials, the face of a very old woman scowling forever with unceasing hatred and misery at herself and all others, at life, and death, at that which had been and that which was to come. She saw instead of her own face in the glass, the face of her dead Aunt Harriet, topping her own shoulders in her own well-known dress. (100)

26 Looking at herself in the mirror, Sophia's reflection slowly but surely (ef)faces itself to be (recon)figured into the self of another—or, more probably, into another but unrecognizable self. Striking, indeed, is the way the repetitive and incantatory rhythm of the description writes on and covers (harsh *lines*, *wrinkled*, thin *line*) her arguably blank and un-meaningful face (smooth, soft, steady) replacing it by the features of another, that of her dead aunt who fixates and freezes Sophia into an eternally frozen image of her self: "scowling *forever* with *unceasing* hatred" (italics mine). Still, in many ways, the hidden self that emerges is just like Sophia's, for both are intent on holding onto the family property in the name of family honor; both are strong-willed and uncompromising; both are judgmental and proud. Given this proximity, Sophia's identification with her strong-willed and masculine aunt can be said to be at the root of her disgust with the feminine that is closest to her—her mother, her sister, her niece and her own self. Indeed, in its wandering outside the path set by masculine proper(ty), the feminine threatens to dilapidate family fortune and as such can be but loathsome. Secretly identifying with Aunt Harriet but refusing to admit it, Sophia is both attracted to and revolted by that which threatens her very own sense of being. In this oscillation, Sophia experiences the *abject*:

> Il y a, dans l'abjection, une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l'être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d'un dehors ou d'un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable... Mais en même temps, quand même, cet élan, ce spasme, ce saut, est attiré vers un ailleurs aussi tentant que condamné. (Kristeva, 1980, 9)

27 As she becomes mesmerized with but repelled by the Other she sees emerging in the mirror, Sophia loses any clear sense of self and seeks to confirm her identity by means of scrutiny from the outside. She runs out of the room to her sister Amanda and asks her to describe what it is she sees: " 'Look at me, Amanda Gill,' she said in an awful voice. Amanda looked, shrinking. 'What is it? Oh, what is it? You don't look hurt. What is it Sophia?' 'What do you see?' 'Why, I see you.' 'Me?' 'Yes, you. What did you think I would see?' " While the dialogue between the two sisters is supposed to clarify the situation, the equivocal nature of Amanda's answer ("Why, I see you") only makes it more complex. Indeed, whether the grammatical pronoun "you" really corresponds to the self that Sophia has seen reflected in the mirror is something neither Sophia nor anybody will ever know. Indeed, offering no clear revelation, the cryptic line only points to the tragically cleft and haunted structure of the (feminine) self.

Indirection, delay and digressions: "Success in Circuit lies"[11]

28 When Rebecca Flint reaches her niece's step-mother's house in "The Wind in the Rosebush," the wavering rosebush on Mrs. Dent's terrace is only the first of many supernatural incidents that will stand in for Agnes: "Suddenly the rosebush was agitated violently as if by a gust of wind, yet it was a remarkably still day" (13). Indeed, the supernatural introduced thanks to this rosebush will rise crescendo, first with the apparition of shadows (16), then with the blowing wind (18), the strange smell of roses, the midnight piano playing and finally the nightgown lying on her bed, with arms in a cross and a rose in the middle. This accumulation of supernatural events in lieu of her niece's presence clearly make of "The Wind in the Rosebush" a fantastic text in which the central character and reader start to hesitate and doubt the reality of events even as the plot unfolds:

> J'en vins presque à 'croire' : voilà la formule qui résume l'esprit du fantastique. La foi absolue comme l'incrédulité totale nous mèneraient hors du fantastique ; c'est l'hésitation qui lui donne vie... Le fantastique implique non seulement l'existence d'un événement étrange, qui provoque une hésitation chez le lecteur et le héros ; mais aussi une manière de lire, qu'on peut pour l'instant définir négativement : elle ne doit être ni poétique, ni allégorique. (Todorov, 1970, 30-35)

29 As the events she encounters grow stranger and stranger, Rebecca's otherwise rational speech starts being infected by hesitation and doubt. Adopting a non-poetical and a non-allegorical reading, the reader doubts with her. Convinced she has seen her niece pass in front of the window while she was waiting for her in the house, Rebecca Flint revises her own conclusions just a few moments later when Mrs. Dent tells her "she couldn't have seen her" (16): "I *thought* I saw a shadow pass the window, but I *must have* been mistaken. She didn't come in, or we *would have* seen her before now" (16). Modalities invade Rebecca Flint's speech and later, when she returns from her room where she has discovered her niece's nightgown folded, her syntax comes apart with dashes interrupting her thought and repetitions pointing to her distress: "I found when I went upstairs that—little nightgown of—Agnes's on—the bed, laid out. It was—laid out" (24). Words fail her and force her to her last question: "Is this house haunted or what?" (25). In spite of Mrs. Dent's denegation, the house is indeed haunted—however, not by ghosts but by absent mothers and dead daughters.

30 Rebecca Flint can indeed be seen as a ghost-like figure ("she was tall, spare and pale") in search of a surrogate daughter whom she will never find; her own sister and mother, both have died, leaving her an orphan: "I ain't got any family to leave." As for her niece, she has been "neglected" by her stepmother and left to die. While this last fact constitutes the hidden heart of the quest and the very center of the text, it is mentioned only in a very circumlocutory way, as if the narrator/author could not speak it straightforwardly. It is as if Agnes' death was literally unspeakable, and the truth about her plight not something that could be told. Hence, when Rebecca inquires about her niece's stepmother during the boat crossing, Mrs. Amblecrom's answers are truncated, vague and unfinished: "I—guess she's a nice woman... I—don't know, I—guess so. I—don't see much of her" (9). Pressed to explain her strange behavior, Mrs. Amblecrom chokes, stalls, hesitates and ends up by saying that "nothing" (9) is wrong. The truth she can deliver is fragmentary and perambulating as her anagrammatic name suggests: "morcel/amble". Creating mystery, her circumlocutions point to the

unnamable nature of the dark secret whose final revelation will be ceaselessly delayed and deferred.

31 Mrs. Dent's strategy of storytelling is likewise deferral. Indeed, spinning out her tale in order to escape discovery, Mrs. Dent ceaselessly invents far-fetched plots to keep the secret of how she abused and neglected Agnes well guarded. In order to justify Agnes' absence to her aunt, Mrs. Dent first explains that she is with her friend Addie Slocum; when the young girl doesn't show up, she says that Agnes is probably flirting with boys. As time passes, however, her explanations become more and more convoluted and unbelievable. Fleshing out her narrative with cousins, aunts and uncles (19), Mrs. Dent adds details to her answers and continues:

> She's gone with Addie to Lincoln. Addie's got an uncle who's conductor on the train, and lives there, and he got 'em passes, and they're going to stay to Addie's Aunt Margaret's a few days. Mrs. Slocum said Agnes didn't have time to come over and ask me before the train went, but she took it on herself to say it would be all right, and—. (20)

32 Mrs. Dent's paratactic syntax, which introduces ever-new places and characters, seems never-ending; arbitrarily interrupted by Rebecca, it could go on forever, as the dangling dash suggests. The inclusion of reported speech accentuates the artificiality of this yarn whose threads seem to have been very grossly weaved. The result reads like a bewildering tall-tale whose function is not only to save Mrs. Dent from having to reveal her role in Agnes' disappearance, but also to delay the final revelation both for the reader and Rebecca. The narrator is obviously enjoying her yarn and wants to make it last, postponing its sinister finale. The letter Rebecca receives during her stay with Mrs. Dent functions in a similarly dilatory way. Coming in "unusually late" (26) in the day, the letter is another ploy used by Mrs. Dent to divert Rebecca's attention and path away from the discovery of her role in her niece's death. Bringing news to Rebecca of her cousin, the letter contains a strange postscript:

> It was in a different hand, purported to have been written by the friend, Mrs. Hannah Greenaway, informing her that her cousin had fallen down the cellar stairs and broken her hip, and was in a dangerous condition, and begging Rebecca to return at once, as she herself was rheumatic and unable to nurse her properly, and no one else could be obtained. (26)

33 The content of the letter finally convinces Rebecca to leave, though the name of the friend (Green/away) together with the paratactic sentences and implausible plot hint to the true author of the missive. Despite the glaring evidence ("written in a different hand"), Rebecca prefers to stick to the letter of the text and return to the safety of home. To the end, Mrs. Dent's successive plots send Rebecca on numerous false routes, which eventually bring her back to her starting point; she leaves without knowing what has happened to her niece. Approaching the truth only tangentially, Rebecca's circling around the truth draws an imaginary boundary around an unnamable blind spot—the secret of her niece's death by neglect. Delaying the discovery of truth, Rebecca pretends nothing has changed. In the gap opened up by her refusal to assign any definite meaning to the evidence she sees around her, she will indeed be able to re-trace and reinvent the coordinates of her niece's life and, as it were, keep the dead child alive.

34 While child abuse is also the secret that lies at the heart of the "The Lost Ghost," the ghostly manifestation of the dead child creates a more visibly haunting presence here. Indeed, while only a symbolic rosebush, abstract music and wind served to evoke

Agnes' ghostly presence in "The Wind in the Rosebush," it is the abused body of the child, purple, cold and mottled, that holds center stage in "The Lost Ghost."[12] But as in the previous tale, the ghost's story can only be told through screens. Indeed, the story of "The Lost Ghost" is a rather complexly written tale in which different narrative planes compose a densely knit text where secrets can hide. The story, told by Mrs. Meserve to Mrs. Emerson, is that of her encounter with the "lost ghost," a little girl who was locked in her house and left to die by her mother who ran away with her lover.

35 However, before the story of the ghostly encounter per se can be told, at least four different sets of characters, each figuring in a relatively autonomous plot, produce preliminary stories. Mrs. Meserve will not deliver the truth at once but opens up plots within her narrative that will put off the time of revelation. The first narrative is composed of Mrs. Emerson and Mrs. Meserve, who is the story teller; the second, by the family in South Dayton, whose life-story is schematically drawn and triggers Mrs. Meserve's story; the third frame, arching back into the past, deals with Mrs. Meserve's supernatural encounter with the lost ghost while she is a boarder at the house of two women she loved greatly, Mrs. Dennison and Mrs. Abby Bird; the fourth frame reaches even further back in time as it gives an explanation to these hauntings, delineating the character of the child's/ghost's father and abusive mother; finally, the last ensemble, which brings together Abby Bird and the lost ghost, can be seen as the resolution. As in anamnesis, the movement drawn by these embedded narratives allows both the narrator and reader to revisit the past, explore memories and remember—both recall and reconstruct—past events. This backwards movement also functions as a deferring device, pushing back in time and space the heart of Mrs. Meserve's narrative.

36 As a young school teacher who has no family, Mrs. Meserve/Arms decides to board with Miss Dennison and her sister Abby, "a real motherly sort of woman" (127). The arrangement provides the two older women with a daughter, while it gives Mrs. Arms a family. The restorative function of the arrangement is clearly spelled out—"we wanted the young company" (126)—and especially meaningful to Abby who takes great care of her boarder. While thus settled, Mrs. Meserve/Arms starts seeing the ghost of a child who ceaselessly repeats: "I can't find my mother" (129). When she confronts the two sisters with this ghost, they are forced to admit that they too have seen it and start telling its story. The ghost is a child who haunts the house and acts out different and repetitive domestic scenes. The child/ghost is hence described playing with the cat, washing the dishes, picking out the raisins in cookies or playing with sticks beside the fire. While the sisters do not know what to make of these scenes at first, they soon find out how these tableaux in fact ceaselessly re-enact the mother's abuse of her own child's:

> They said the woman made the little thing, though she wasn't much over five years old, and small and babyish for her age, do most of the work, what there was done... They said the little thing used to stand on a chair and wash dishes, and they'd seen her carrying in sticks of wood most as big as she was many a time, and they'd heard her mother scolding her. (137)

37 Ethereal and airy, flitting like a "butterfly," the child's body is still strikingly present in these descriptions, calling attention to its physical miseries and abuse—with the blue of her skin not only signifying cold but also evoking beating and bruises. While the exact nature of the child's abuse is never really ascertained or spelled out—"It looked as if the mother had... though they weren't sure she had frozen to death... probably she

thought"—for Mrs. Meserve, the conclusion is simple: "Whatever she thought, there the child was, dead" (139). It is this grim fact that is at the heart of the text, giving an explanation to the ghost's traumatic death and return. Interestingly, the child's actions are described twice in the text, structurally re-enacting and repeating the haunting of the ghost. The traumatic event at the basis of the story simply cannot be (re)integrated into the warp and web of the tale, haunting the entire narrative which itself becomes a haunted structure as it continually opens up unto new plots and situations, enabling Freeman to set up a proper distance between herself and her narrative.

38 While the numerous *mises en abyme* veil the grim truth at the heart of the text, digressions make it swerve off its course more than once. As she narrates her experience to Mrs. Emerson, Mrs. Meserve's tale folds back on itself (127) or stalls, interrupted as it constantly is by innumerable digression and seemingly superfluous details. Coming back on the circumstances of her strange experience, Mrs. Meserve pauses:

> Well, I went there in September. I began school the first Monday. I remember it was a real cold fall, there was a frost in the middle of September, and I had to put on my winter coat. I remember when I came home that night (let me see, I began school on a Monday, and that was two weeks from the next Thursday), I took off my coat downstairs and laid it on the table in the front entry. It was a real nice coat—heavy black broad cloth trimmed with fur. (127)

39 Instead of moving forward, her narrative progresses little, as temporal precisions, numerous weather reports, superfluous details together with heavy and pointed alliteration (*black broad*) clog its progress. Full of digressions, Mrs. Meserve's eminently subjective story, registering her own moods and impressions, breaks up the rhythm of the plot to lengthen and in the end, delay its outcome.

The pleasure of the text: feminine deferral

40 While the storytellers develop countless strategies, which work to delay the moment of revelation, the fabric of the text works in the very opposite direction, literally producing revelation and disclosure. To quote Roland Barthes:

> Texte veut dire tissu ; mais alors que jusqu'ici on a toujours pris ce tissu pour un produit, un voile tout fait, derrière lequel se tient, plus ou moins caché, le sens (la vérité), nous accentuons maintenant, dans le tissu, l'idée *générative* que le texte se fait, se travaille à travers un entrelacs perpétuel... (Barthes, 1994, 1527, italics mine)

41 *Generating* ever-new meanings, the text functions like a web, branching out both intertextually and extra-textually, suspending the time of final revelation but also making it appear on its very surface. If the name Slocum (Slow-come) rings like a deathly omen, the sexual undertones present in the name are also quite striking, something which Mrs. Dent's explanation for Agnes' absence takes up: "I guess you'll find out that a young girl ain't so ready to leave a sociable, where there's boys, to see her aunt" (16). When Rebecca answers that she's "too young" for such relationships, Mrs. Dent answers: "She's sixteen, and she's always been great for boys" (17). The link between female sexuality and death re-surfaces over and over again in Freeman's narrative where fiction-making and story-telling seem like the only way to counter the fatality of feminine desire. Later on, thinking about the rapidity with which her brother re-married, Rebecca Stark reflects: "I suppose he *wanted* his house kept and Agnes *wanted* care" (10, italics mine), where "want", meaning both "needs" and "lacks,"

unwittingly bespeaks Agnes' unfortunate plight. After, when she imagines her niece back home with her, Rebecca muses: "I suppose she'll be *homesick* at first", once again unknowingly evoking the truth of her niece's experience. Like in a real detective story, clues hover on the surface of the text. For example, while the reference to the "Maiden Prayer" clearly points to a popular nineteenth-century tune, its title also evokes John Keat's famous poem, "The Eve of Saint Agnes," whose title itself reaches back to Saint Agnes, the patron saint of virgins, martyred around 303. Significantly, Agnes' white gown bespeaks not only her own virginal innocence, dispelling any improper misconduct suggested by Mrs. Dent; it also points to a mortuary shroud. Bodies, too, function like signifying texts, generating meaning in spite of themselves. Unable to understand the signs around her, Rebecca's own body eventually becomes *hysterical*, speaking out a narrative her mind refuses to accept: "there were red spots on her cheek;" "her mouth gaped;" "when she came back, her eyes seemed to protrude" (20).

42 In "The Lost Ghost" similarly, themes, motifs and tenses all bring to the surface a plot that the narrator tries to keep hidden. Hence while the lost ghost appears most pointedly in the fourth section, reference to a ghost is made as early as the second section, linking the two planes. The motif of "cold" which is associated to the ghost also blurs the clear separation of different narrative planes as it proliferates across the sections. Associated to the waif, who is also present in the first framework, cold is present in the last section as well. The same could be said of the "shawl" which Mrs. Meserve wears as she enters her friend's house but which is present in the last frame when Abby Bird tries to cover the child with it. In fact, such dissemination invades every level of the text, linking together different temporal planes: while the motherly "Abby Bird" is eager to take care of the child, she is also a "baby" as her name suggests, a mirror image of the ghost itself. But Abby Bird, in turn, is also linked to Mrs. Meserve, something suggested by her physical appearance. Indeed, Mrs. Meserve's "plumy black hat" and her "ruffling skirt" together with her face, "delicate, nervous and tinted like a shell" (121), implicitly link her to Abby the Bird. The fact that both women are without family further deepens the link that is evoked by the reference to Abby's stretched out "arms" sticking out of her casket (Mrs. Meserve/Miss Arms). The use of tenses also suggests the proximity of events seemingly belonging to different planes and serves to change the focus of events: while the story-line/plot clearly sets the story of the ghost in the past, grammatical tenses suggest otherwise, as the simple past is used for the time of enunciation while direct speech and present tense are used to speak about the past. The result of this temporal crisscrossing is a change of perspective in which Mrs. Emerson and Mrs. Meserve recede to the back of the text, while the ghost and its plight seem to come forward, occupying not only the heart but also the center of the narrative. Brought to life by the use of direct speech and present tense, past matters suddenly become very alive indeed. Recounting the story of her first encounter with the ghost and her distress, Mrs. Meserve explains:

> I just stood there and called, and finally I heard the entry door open and Mrs. Bird called back: 'What is it? Did you call Miss Arms?' 'Come up here; come here as quick as you can, both of you,', I screamed out; 'quick, quick, quick'. I heard Mrs. Bird tell Mrs. Dennison: 'Come quick, Amelia, something is the matter in Miss Arm's room'. It struck me even then that she expressed herself rather queerly. (130)

43 If the use of tenses makes the story come to life, its testimonial nature also ensures it will not become a thing of the past. Like a legacy kept alive by iterative narration, the story of abuse and pain is a tale passed onto others—the story told by Mrs. Meserve is in

fact a story she has heard from Mrs. Dennison and Abby, who themselves have heard it from the people of the town. And so it is again each time a new reader reads it; both old and new, the story comes alive each time it is told,[13] making the past a thing of the present and the present a thing of the past. Bringing back to the surface themes and images that establish a link between past and present issues, and blending motifs that belong to different time frames, the text literally un-buries ghosts:

> S'il y a quelque chose comme de la spectralité, il y a des raisons de douter de cet ordre rassurant des présents, et surtout de la frontière entre le présent, la réalité actuelle ou présente du présent et tout ce qu'on peut lui opposer : l'absence, la non-présence, l'ineffectivité, l'inactualité, la virtualité ou même le simulacre en général, etc. Il y a d'abord à douter de la contemporanéité à soi du présent. Avant de savoir si on peut faire la différence entre le spectre du passé et celui du futur, du présent passé et du présent futur, il faut peut-être se demander si l'effet de spectralité ne consiste pas à déjouer cette opposition, voire cette dialectique, entre la présence effective et son autre. (Derrida, 1993, 72)

44 Truly spectral, Freeman's tales hover on the frontier between past and present to inhabit the haunted territory of fiction. Still, while her different narratives tell frightening tales of suffering, the very act of telling is presented as curative, enabling its teller to find some kind of relief, as when Mrs. Emerson observes: "Well, of course I don't want to urge you if you don't feel like talking about it; but *maybe* it *might* do you good to tell it out, *if* it's on your mind worrying you" (125, italics mine) to which Mrs. Meserve answers "I can't explain it... If you can, well and good; I shall be glad, for *it will stop tormenting me* as it has done and always will otherwise" (124, italics mine). But, however much desired, the relief seems doubly hypothetical (*maybe/might*), the comfort provided by story-telling looking like more like a thing of the future (*will*) than like something certain. The wish for a way out of traumatic experiences is strong, but the very tropological nature of language, ever producing new and differing meanings, points to the inability to ever step out of it.

45 In the end, if there is a way out, it seems to be only "slantwise" (Dickinson), for the direct and blunt logic of the masculine is deathly indeed, as demonstrated by the final revelation in "The Wind in the Rosebush." At the end of the story, when the truth of Agnes' abuse is revealed, it is indeed significant that it is told bluntly, directly, in an unmediated way, by the very man who had barred its access in the first place.

> 'Dear Madam', he wrote, 'your favor re'ced. No Slocums in Ford's Village. All dead. Addie ten years ago, her mother two years later, her father five. House vacant. Mrs. John Dent said to have neglected stepdaughter. Girl was sick. Medicine not given. Talk of taking action. Not enough evidence. House said to be haunted. Strange sights and sounds. Your niece, Agnes Dent, died a year ago, about this time. 'Yours truly, 'Thomas Amblecrom.' (28)

46 A-syntactical, direct, basic, the truth, when it comes, "dazzles" (Dickinson); it is plain, bare, and blunt and with its revelation, the narrative foreplay comes to an end. As such, it stands in direct opposition to Mrs. Meserve's elaborate storytelling or Mrs. Dent's fanciful lying, who both perpetually delay and postpone the climax. Obviously linked to the feminine in the text, their yarns read indeed as fanciful pieces of artwork where the storytellers revel in their own telling and playfully differ closure. Still, while these fantastic tales are told by women, the narratives are framed (and controlled?) by spectral masculine figures. Indeed, whether it is Mr. Amblecrom who warns his wife not to tell the truth, Mrs. Meserve's husband who repeatedly tells his wife not to tell her story or masculine Aunt Harriet who bars access to her house, it is the very

masculine *refusal* for any proper meaning that sets the women in motion to tell their improper stories of abuse and desire: male figures frame the texts, enabling "scribbling" women to tell their tales. Or do they really?

47 However authoritarian, the truth that is revealed remains ambiguous to the end, the very logic of fiction undermining its apparent fixity. Indeed, indirections insinuate themselves in the fabric of Mr. Amblecrom's message ("said to be") while the assertive tone of the missive is undermined by its very content ("not enough evidence"). If Mary Wilkins Freeman constructed masculine figures to enable the deployment of a female imagination, the playfulness of her very language takes back any authority she lent these figures,[14] making it possible for her to reclaim as her own the stories of child abuse and frustrated desire she stages in these texts. Read as the result of her constant negotiations between the fertility of her fantastic imagination and her guilt at such uncontrolled and scribbled productivity (an anxiety of influence?), it is little wonder Freeman's texts reverberate with such hauntingly strange sights and sounds.

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NOTES

1. "In the heterotopic mirror of the past, a new, Gothic nature is discovered, a nature of sublimity and imagination that will be appropriated by Romantic poets, while Gothic finds itself relegated to popular culture and trashy realm of cheap, formulaic fiction" (Botting in Punter, 2000, 12).

2. "By provincial gothic, I mean the use of gothic conventions to anatomize the pathology of regional culture" (Buell, 1986, 351)

3. "As early as the 1790's, Ann Radcliff firmly set the gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine" (Moers, 1977, 91).

4. This domestic trap echoes Emily Dickinson's poem #398: "I had not minded—Walls."

5. This title echoes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's chapter "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *op. cit.*

6. Buell shows how by the end of the Nineteenth century Hawthorne had become the hypotext for many New England writers: "Whereas Hawthorne and Neal had been inspired mostly by European models, the late century regionalists looked back increasingly to their compatriots, Stowe and Hawthorne especially, and in this way New England gothic became self-sustaining" (Buell, 1986, 353).

7. In an analysis of the way the proper is linked to the masculine while the gift is linked to the feminine, Hélène Cixous says: "Procès historique dynamisé par le drame du Propre, l'impossibilité de penser un désir qui n'entraîne pas le conflit et la destruction. Nous vivons toujours sous l'Empire du Propre. Les mêmes maîtres dominent l'histoire depuis les commencements, y inscrivant les marques de leur économie appropriante : l'histoire, comme histoire du phallocentrisme ne s'est déplacée que pour se répéter" (Cixous, 1975, 144).

8. Emily Dickinson: "One need not be a chamber to be haunted" (#670).

9. For an analysis of the workings of the anamorphosis, see Lacan, *op. cit.*

10. For another fertile and fascinating wall-paper, see Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," 1894.

11. Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (#1129).

12. While Glasser focuses her analysis on the maternal figures of the text, looking at the consequences on women's life of having or not children, I will concentrate on the child itself and the underlying story of abuse and violence its presence suggests (Glasser, 220).

13. "Répétition et première fois mais aussi répétition et dernière fois, car la singularité de toute première fois en fait aussi une dernière fois. Chaque fois, c'est l'événement même, une première fois est une dernière fois. Tout autre. Mise en scène pour une autre histoire. Appelons cela une hantologie" (Derrida, 1993, 31).

14. In the construction of these masculine figures, one thinks of what Cixous says about the feminine : “Je dirai : aujourd’hui l’écriture est aux femmes. Ce n’est pas une provocation, cela signifie que : la femme admet qu’il y ait de l’autre. Elle n’a pas effacé, dans son devenir-femme, la bisexualité latente chez la fille comme chez le garçon” (Cixous, 1975, 158). In this case, the other is the masculine.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article se propose d’étudier comment Mary E. Wilkins Freeman met en scène, mais de façon très indirecte, des récits traumatiques d’enfants battus, de violence domestique et de désirs féminins frustrés. Dans ces récits aux accents gothiques, le moment de révélation est constamment différé par d’ingénieuses narratrices qui inventent des histoires sans fin, comme si leurs secrets ne pouvaient se dire. De manière paradoxale, cette *différance* est soulignée par la présence spectrale de figures masculines qui autorisent en même temps qu’elles bloquent la possibilité d’une quelconque révélation. *In fine*, le sens de ces récits, où l’interaction constante du masculin et du féminin se révèle éminemment fertile, n’est livré que par fragments, intermittence et indirection. Si le traumatisme au cœur du texte fait donc retour, il ne peut se dire que par les voies dérobées de l’indirection, une rhétorique que Freeman assimile au *féminin*

The following article analyzes the ways in which nineteenth-century regional writer Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) composes supernatural tales that address in a very indirect fashion disturbing issues such as child abuse, domestic violence and frustrated female desires. In her gothic-like domestic tales, the climax of revelation is indeed continually deferred, as if the female storyteller could simply not tell her secret. Such a rhetoric of indirection becomes all the more intricate as these stories are haunted by spectral but authoritarian male figures whose presence both facilitates and blocks the possibility of revelation. This results in the production of ever-elusive meanings, in which the interaction between the *masculine* and the *feminine* plays a key role. In the end, if trauma lies at the heart of Freeman’s texts, it can only be revealed indirectly, in a rhetoric that Freeman links to the *feminine*.

INDEX

Mots-clés : différance, écriture régionaliste, femmes écrivains, gothique, hantise, indirection, Littérature américaine du xixe, rhétorique du féminin, spectral, suspens, traumatisme, violence domestique
Keywords : deferral, domestic violence, feminine rhetoric, gothic genre, indirection, Nineteenth-century American women writers, regional writers, spectral haunting, suspension, trauma

AUTEUR

AUDREY FOGELS

Université de Paris 8-Saint -Denis